

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2009

May 23, 2009, Mead Chapel

Good afternoon. On behalf of the faculty, staff, and trustees of the College, I extend a warm welcome to you, the Class of 2009, and to your parents, families, and friends who have joined you on campus this weekend to celebrate your accomplishments.

Today we reflect on all that you have experienced over the past four years and on your contributions to our community and the world beyond the College. And, of course, since this is Commencement weekend, we look ahead, as well, to the opportunities that await you as you begin the next chapter of your lives.

Let me begin by telling you a few things about the graduating class:

- There are 633 graduates in this class (which includes February and May graduates), 296 men and 337 women.
- The five most popular majors were economics, international studies, English and American literatures, political science, and psychology.
- About 84 percent of you studied at least one language other than English.
- And nearly 60 percent studied abroad for at least one semester, in 47 countries.

Members of your class have earned:

- A Thomas J. Watson Fellowship,
- Three Fulbright Scholar grants,
- A St. Andrews Society Fellowship for graduate study in Scotland,
- One of the 40 Marshall Scholarships awarded to Americans for graduate study in the United Kingdom,
- Two Compton Mentor Fellowships,
- And four Kathryn Wasserman Davis Projects for Peace fellowships.

The scholarship and imagination of your class were vividly demonstrated a few weeks ago at the third annual College-wide symposium recognizing student research and creativity. Some 85 members of your class participated in that symposium, reporting on an amazing array of research.

Many of you have published papers in scholarly journals and presented your work at national conferences. Two of you found new and creative ways to tell Middlebury student stories as narrative journalism fellows. Others explored the essence of a Vermont community, gathering and preserving the stories of nearby Starksboro. Still others helped to organize the Hunt, a J-term scavenger hunt that encourages students to compete in creative, or sometimes just odd, pursuits.

A Middlebury education emphasizes civic engagement as well as scholarship, and your class has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to volunteerism and community service. That commitment was recognized this spring when 17 seniors were nominated for Public Service Leadership Citations, and 11 members of the Class of 2009 received awards. More than half of your class has volunteered in town or in Addison County, helping an extraordinary number of Vermonters along the way.

It would be hard to overstate your class' commitment to the environment and your determination to address one of the critical issues of our time: climate change.

- Just three weeks ago, for example, Middlebury students helped to organize a global climate change workshop sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. The purpose of the conference was to develop strategies for getting to "350"—that's 350 parts per million of CO₂ in our atmosphere, the level scientists have identified as the safe upper limit.
- And several of you contributed videos to the new national media project *Planet Forward*, an online Web community devoted to broadening the national dialogue on energy and climate change. Two of your videos were featured on the first *Planet Forward* TV special broadcast by PBS. I should mention that *Planet Forward* is the brainchild of Frank Sesno, Class of 1977, who tomorrow at Commencement will receive an honorary degree from the College.

The example that members of this class has set in demonstrating how individuals can join together to bring about positive change is truly inspiring.

Your achievements in the arts are impressive, as well.

- Three of you were part of the Potomac Theatre Project's summer season in New York City, and nine more will participate this summer. PTP will perform plays written by two members of your class as part of its "After Dark" program.
- A member of your class won an American College Theatre Festival Voice Award, and was the alternate in the Irene Ryan National Acting competition.

- Two seniors were chosen to represent New England in the American College Dance Festival Association at the National Dance Gala in New York.
- And another of your classmates won the College concerto competition as a first-year, followed it up by winning the chamber music competition, and then studied music composition in Paris.

In athletics, too, you have excelled.

- Members of your class have earned 20 All-American honors in intercollegiate sports, including one five-time All-American.
- You've garnered 51 all-NESCAC honors and 81 all-NESCAC academic honors.
- You played on teams that won 19 NESCAC championships and eight national titles for Middlebury over the past four years, including national championships in men's and women's ice hockey, men's soccer, women's cross country, and men's rugby.
- Four of you powered the men's basketball team to its first ever NESCAC championship, second NCAA appearance, and a school record 24 wins. One of our seniors became the first Middlebury basketball player ever to win All-American honors.
- Members of the class helped the baseball team to achieve its most successful year in Middlebury history a few seasons back, earning its first NESCAC championship and an NCAA tournament appearance.
- Three teams—men's lacrosse, men's tennis, and women's ice hockey—took four straight trips to the NCAA tournament during your time here.

Finally, the campus community is grateful to the senior mathematicians who helped to snap a five-year winning streak for Williams College (or, conversely, a five-year losing streak for us), bringing the "green chicken" home to Middlebury. The green chicken is a rather ugly—but nonetheless coveted—casserole dish that has been the victor's prize in an annual math competition between Middlebury and Williams since 1978.

These are just a sample of the accomplishments of the Class of 2009. We are enormously proud of all of you, and thank you for all that you have contributed to this vibrant and talented community.

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As many of you may know, but many more probably do not, the Baccalaureate address, going back to its roots more than 500 years ago, was to be the final sermon, a religious address, to the graduating class. It was offered most commonly by the president of the college or university. You will be happy to know that I will stick with tradition only to the extent that I view this opportunity ... this honor ... to address you for the final time as a class. I will not make this a religious address for reasons that may be obvious. The Baccalaureate service originated at Oxford in 1432, and its sermons were invariably Christian, and so, given my own religious background, and the fact that I am one of only four of the College's 16 presidents not to have been an ordained minister, it would be quite a challenge to retain the full tradition of the Baccalaureate.

I should also note that, according to historical records, Baccalaureate speeches are often intermixed with musical performances, drama, and worship, and the main address, and according to reliable sources, can range in length from under half an hour to as long as four hours. But have no fear again! I am far more likely by disposition to present a shorter rather than longer speech, and that will be the case today.

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As I sat down to think about the message I would like to convey to you in this the final time I will address you as a class, I could not ignore the historic times in which we live, and how they are likely to affect your early outlook on life, post-Middlebury. As many of us might be growing weary of hearing, the situation today is most commonly compared to the darkest era in modern capitalism, the Great Depression. That period began in 1929 with the stock market crash, and didn't really end until after World War II, 16 years later. The economy contracted dramatically, unemployment soared, there was a crisis of confidence in the financial markets and other institutions, personal wealth plummeted, and prospects for the future were bleak. In many ways, things don't look all that different today.

Now you may be thinking, "Oh boy, this is certainly not the makings of an uplifting speech, is it?" Yet it is, because as the title of the Baccalaureate address clearly states in your program, what lies before you as you prepare to take your place in the wider world with a Middlebury degree in hand represents, in so many ways, the opportunity of a lifetime.

I will get to why this is so in due course, but I want to share how my thinking progressed in preparing this final address to your class. With my topic in hand, I asked what source materials ought I to consult to see the parallels facing those who were graduating between 1929 and 1934 and today. I decided to read that familiar chronicler of local news—*The Middlebury Campus*, which used to publish through Commencement, and included the Baccalaureate and Commencement addresses from the weekend. It turned out to be far more interesting than I had expected. Not only was the quality of the writing superb, but the wisdom contained in several of the editorials was inspiring.

For the purposes of this address, I reviewed the Commencement issues from 1929 to 1934, as I thought that reading the Baccalaureate speeches of then President Moody would provide a good foundation for some of my own thinking. Well, if you consider my earlier comments about the historical roots of the Baccalaureate service and address—rooted in the Christian tradition—and that every Middlebury College president from 1800 to 1943 was an ordained (Christian) minister, you might have guessed sooner than I did that the addresses from the 1929-1934 period, while filled with numerous lessons for a lifetime, were highly grounded in, and replete with, liturgical texts.

Thus, while rich with wisdom for those who were about to graduate in the early 1930s, they did not serve as the analog for today's address as I had thought they might. Still, they were useful in helping me shape the overall message I wanted to convey.

Perusing those 80-year old editions of *The Campus* provided a valuable window into the College's past, and into our alumni's experiences, some of which seem unfamiliar and dated, but others feel very familiar despite the passing of time. The most relevant material I gleaned from the June Commencement issues of *The Campus* about the messages conveyed to graduates during the Great Depression came in three editorials and two speeches from the weekend celebrations.

President Moody, as I said, was an ordained minister and his Baccalaureate addresses relied heavily on religious texts to convey lessons for life after college. In the great uncertainty of the times, with so many graduates unsure of their future, he sought to calm the graduates' collective anxiety by reminding them that one can never be sure of what hand one might be dealt, but that the four years at college, and one's desire to continue to learn, would be a vital determinant of whether or not one would excel no matter the state of the national economy.

In his 1931 address, two years into the Great Depression, Moody never mentioned the unprecedented financial crisis, but instead tried to portray the challenges those in the audience would face as simply a natural part of the uncertainties of life. He reminded the graduates that "Life is a mystery. Its meaning is a mystery.... You can never know all that you will want to know, unless your minds are incredibly small. If you are worthy of the opportunities of these four years which you have spent here, your minds have become insatiable. ... You are condemned to be forever unsatisfied. But the measure of your success will be the measure of your unsatisfied longing for ever clearer light, for ever greater opportunities, for ever greater understanding, [and] for ever increasing knowledge."

The other speech I found compelling, largely because it included specific references to the Depression, was the 1931 Commencement address by Dr. Daniel Willard. Willard was a native Vermonter, and was president of the Baltimore and Ohio railroads at a time when railroads were king. Willard had dreamed of becoming a physician from an early age, but an unusual and sudden decline in eyesight prevented him from continuing his medical studies.

He used his personal story of a lost dream to exhort the graduates to keep hope, and, in his words, to "delete the word discourage from [your] thinking. No matter how bad," he pleaded, "move forward." That is what Willard did when he abandoned his medical studies and instead accepted an entry-level job with the railroad. He eventually worked his way to the top of the railroad to become its president, a position he held for more than 20 years.

During his time with the railroad, before becoming its president, Willard's eyesight improved slowly, and so he purchased a copy of Gray's Anatomy, the foundational text on the human anatomy. He studied it regularly, holding out hope he would someday be able to pursue medicine once again. And that was his message to the Class of 1931: one should not be defeated by initial disappointment, Willard told the graduates, recognizing that so many in the class had only limited prospects for employment, and if they did, their choices were so slim, they most likely had to abandon their initial dreams of a particular career path.

He noted that "more than 5 million men, able to work, were unable to find employment in the United States." This reference to the large number of unemployed underscored his message that in such tough economic times, one needed a Plan B, C, and even D, E, and F.

I am sure some of you in the Class of 2009 do not have jobs yet, and many of you who do probably have taken them in areas that were not your first choice. Willard's words of advice should resonate nearly 80 years after he offered them: from difficult circumstances come opportunities that one must pursue, even when they take one away from one's chosen path.

Perhaps more interesting, and relevant to the message I would like to leave you with as you graduate tomorrow, are the commentaries found in the annual farewells that were offered in *The Campus* editorials during Commencement week. In particular, the editorials from 1931, 1932, and 1933, each beautifully written, are rich with observations of the time, and advice to the departing seniors.

I should note that the editorials then were written by members of the junior class, which one might think would dilute the message. Instead, I found the farewells to the senior classes to be bold, in no way overly deferential, and remarkably relevant today, seven... almost eight decades later.

Interestingly, the 1933 editorial, written during one of the low points of the depression, is the most general of the three, never mentioning the depression [and I quote]:

Members of the class of 1933, you have been shown repeatedly during exercises designed for your benefit that yours is a great responsibility, a great trust. You have been told that a new world lies open for you, that yours should be reverence and humility, and at the same time that in this new universe into which you now step you have signal opportunities for adventure, experience, and achievement never before possible.

...But one thought would The Campus seek to impress upon the graduating class. The world is too full already of college alumni who believe that the fact of their existence as graduates is sufficient claim for their success in life. Avoid the accusation of smug conceit in this world in which you are to take your place.

Let it not be said of Middlebury alumni that theirs is an attitude of world indebtedness. Carry on in the greater life beyond Middlebury with all the zeal and hope and faith that these years have meant for you, but be tempered always with the realization that you have attained but a milestone in the path toward the ultimate goal of a truly perfect life.

The 1931 editorial acknowledged the challenges the graduating class would face due to the depression, and stretched a bit to offer a ray of hope [and I quote]:

Better prepared than any preceding [class], yet least sought for the world's work, you who have just graduated are now running hard into the bitter problem of the man and the job. Colleges grow constantly better, their equipments increase and their facilities are augmented. Each year, therefore, the worth of their training becomes greater, and their graduates more suited to perform a useful and efficient function in human society. By this token, then, more potential achievement has been packed into you than into any other college class that has gone before.

Yet an unexplained and uncontrolled phenomenon, recurrent at approximately ten year intervals, though more serious this time than usual, has flared up during the latter period of your education to say that however willing and however able you may be to be of use to the world, for the present there will be no work for you. This phenomenon is called [a] business depression, and the effect of which you are soon to feel is called unemployment.

...Yet you are to enjoy one advantage over two or three classes preceding you. Hitting the struggle of modern business at the lowest ebb in its cycle, you have the upgrade and favorable improvement lying ahead. A harder lot fell to your predecessors, for they were given an apparently hopeful start, only to be rudely dislodged from their jobs and forced to stand idle, waiting for the same favorable turn upon which you pin your hopes, yet disadvantaged by more years lost, and minds more embittered.

And the 1932 editorial also recognized the tough path the class of '32 faced as a result of the depression, but the essence of the editorial was one of support and encouragement [and I quote once more].

It's good bye and good luck, [Class of] '32. ... But we do not intend to say farewell. That is only for people who go out of our lives. But you, and those who have gone before you, and we of the undergraduates who are to follow have a common bond of union.

We have Middlebury—its marble buildings, its trees, and its mountains. There is the iron railing of Old Chapel, delicately outlined in new fallen snow, the big old tree on lower campus, the green of new leaves in spring, the sunsets over the Adirondacks—and a host of other beautiful memories.

We can never lose you, '32. We and you will always have the same thoughts of Middlebury and it is our thoughts which are permanent and never can be taken away. Though we scatter to the ends of the earth, we always shall be together, for our spirits shall hold us in an indissoluble bond.

As for good luck, '32, of course you're graduating when the world is in the depth of a depression. ... We might say that you are fortunate to have the opportunity to start work when business is not at its height, for in that way when recovery does come, your chances of advancement are more rapid. But there is another phase of graduating at this time which is fortunate for you.

During the past year there have been student conferences in all parts of the country to discuss world affairs in politics, economics, and education. A student from Yale university addressed the learned statesmen of the world at Geneva, and he was listened to with careful regard. There was the conference at Williams, which students from Middlebury attended, the Model League of Nations, and countless political conferences. ... It matters little whether the doctrines emanating from the student conferences were truly constructive. ... The important thing is that the world took notice and that student thought was respected.

The world is sick, and [is] waiting for a doctor. It is turning to college graduates and from them expects to find aid. We believe, '32, that with the strength of the hills behind you, you will not fail.

How true then, and how true now. The world indeed is sick and is waiting for a doctor. And each of you has the potential to be a doctor, not necessarily the kind of doctor Daniel Willard sought to become, a *medical doctor*, but rather generalists ... liberal arts doctors ... let's call you doctors of global challenges. And there is no shortage of challenges to tackle; so despite the poor job market out there, there is much each of you can do, and are competent to do, to begin to mend our own 21st century version of the sick world.

No matter your major, your broad, liberal arts education has prepared you well to assess, analyze, critique, tackle, and offer solutions to any particular problem. The financial services industry, including accounting, can surely use some new thinking and reform; environmental challenges abound in great numbers, such as understanding climate change, promoting the planet's sustainability, creating alternative energy sources, and preserving our limited potable water supply; and the latest challenge, brought to the surface during the past decade by the processes of globalization—widespread poverty and inequality, and how each relates to political

instability and conflict—will require solutions rooted in understanding social justice, inter-cultural dynamics, and how institutions across varying political spectrums operate and interrelate with one another.

There may be fewer available conventional jobs out there than in past years, but that should not dampen the opportunities before you as you look for something meaningful to do as you leave Middlebury. You have the intelligence and the liberal arts background to jump in and make a difference. You have the drive and determination to excel, as the first part of this address, highlighting this class' remarkable accomplishments, attests. We might have provided the proverbial training wheels to help you achieve some or even much of what you did during the past four years, but you are ready now to meet the challenges, and the world is waiting again, as it was in 1932.

Though tomorrow each of you will receive your Bachelor of Arts degree for fulfilling all the requirements in your major and across our curriculum, I will usurp today an unusual privilege that presidents are given—one I am sure has never been done, or done quite like this. We typically award honorary degrees at Commencement, and tomorrow we will do just that, awarding seven of them just prior to you receiving your Bachelor of Arts degrees. But here and now, I want to confer upon you collectively, the Class of 2009, a Doctor of Liberal Arts, with which we exhort and expect you to go out and seize the countless opportunities to help cure one of the many ills of the world.

Though you leave here and enter the world beyond college facing the most challenging economic circumstances since the 1930s, there is, before you, an opportunity of a life time to make a difference. Seize that opportunity!

The conditions today look similar to those during the Great Depression, but because of the way in which you have been educated here—within a global context, with a deep commitment to environmental stewardship, and with a broad and deep exposure to, and understanding of, diversity—you are arguably far better prepared to tackle the world's problems than any generation before you. And in the same way *The Campus* editorial writers saw the likely success of the Class of 1932 as it entered its turbulent world, we believe, Class of 2009, that with the strength of the hills behind you, you will not fail.

We wish you all the best of luck; we are counting on you.

Thank you.

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